

Leon

Battista

Alberti:

a Renaissance

Personality

By **SIR KENNETH CLARK**



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Self-Portrait

by courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

MANY READERS OF THAT masterpiece of learning and compression, Jacob Burckhardt's *Renaissance*, must have stopped to re-read the passage in which he describes Leon Battista Alberti, the perfect universal man of the early fifteenth century. "In all by which praise was won," he writes, "Leon Battista was, from his childhood, the first. Of his various gymnastic feats and exercises we read with astonishment how, with his feet together, he could spring over a man's head; how, in the cathedral, he threw a coin in the air till it was heard to ring against the distant roof; how the wildest horses trembled under him. In three things he desired to appear faultless to others, in walking, in riding and in speaking. And all the while he acquired every sort of accomplishment and dexterity, cross-examining

artists, scholars and artisans of all descriptions, down to the cobblers, about the secrets of their craft. . . . That which others created he welcomed joyfully, and held every human achievement which followed the laws of beauty for something almost divine." Burckhardt goes on to describe his skill as a painter, and his literary works, and ends with the following unforgettable passage. "At the sight of noble trees and waving fields of corn he shed tears: handsome and dignified old men he honoured as 'delights of nature' and could never look at them enough—and more than once, when he was ill, the sight of a beautiful landscape cured him." It is as a result of this paragraph alone that Alberti has entered the general historical consciousness, and has even been made the hero of a leading article in *Life* magazine. But

few of those whose imaginations have been stirred by Burckhardt's description can have had the time and patience to carry their researches any further. Lovers of architecture, it is true, are familiar with his buildings, and some will have read his famous treatise on the subject. But both are to a very large extent the expression of his universality, and cannot be properly understood without some knowledge of his other writings and activities : and such knowledge is not easily acquired. Some of Alberti's works are to be found only in scarce editions, some have never been printed ; and apart from these purely material difficulties, his works, with their load of classical quotations and copy-book truths, are heavy-going. The general reader may well turn away in despair from the grandiose fragments and exacting advice, which are all he knows of Alberti, feeling behind them the shadow of a great personality which he can by no means bring into focus.

If Alberti is shadowy, that is certainly not his fault, for few figures of the fifteenth century took more pains to be known. He is, to begin with, the author of the first self-revealing autobiography, since St. Augustine. This remarkable document has received less attention than it deserves, partly because, being written in the third person, it has not usually been treated as an autobiography,¹ although the evidence of this is unmistakable. Even Burckhardt, whose famous passage is no more than a free translation of Alberti's own words, does not seem to recognize them as such. In addition to this experiment in self-projection, Alberti's writings abound in autobiographical allusions, several of them being Socratic dialogues in which he is one of the principal speakers. And he also appears in numerous contemporary writings, in particular in Christoforo Landino's *Quaestiones Camaldolesi*. Finally he has left us on a bronze plaque what we may call the quintessential face of the period between Dante and Michelangelo. It seems almost certain that this portrait, like the anonymous biography, is the

¹ In Bonucci's *Opere Volgari di Leon Batt. Alberti*, 1843, the only place where it is printed, it is included in the introduction pp. xc-cxvii with *Documenti illustrativi*. Bonucci says in a footnote, however, that "we cannot hide our thoughts that these memorials are from the pen of Leon Battista himself"

work of Alberti himself ; the proud self-awareness which this implies being confirmed by the choice of his emblem, a winged eye.

Leon Battista Alberti was born in Genoa in 1404 of an ancient Florentine family which had recently been driven into exile by the persecution of the Albizzi. Like Leonardo da Vinci, he was illegitimate ; but, unlike Leonardo, his father, Lorenzo Alberti, recognized him as a son, took a personal interest in his education, and brought him up in the great traditions of his family. These traditions will be familiar to any reader of Victorian memoirs, for the Alberti were aristocrats of commerce of a kind not uncommon in that period. They had abandoned feudalism for the wood trade in the early fourteenth century, and for a hundred years had conducted great business undertakings all over Europe. We know how success in such activities creates a sense of authority, of independence and of family solidarity greater than any inherited power. In 1411 Lorenzo Alberti moved to Venice, and shortly after Leon Battista was sent to the school of the famous humanist Barsiza in Padua, where he laid the foundations of an immense indiscriminate classical learning ; and already he gave evidence of that almost morbid industry to which he frequently refers in his writings with a kind of fanatical earnestness. "Although at no hour of the day could you see him idle, yet that he might win for himself still more of the fruits of life and time, every evening before going to bed he would set beside himself a wax candle of a certain measure and, sitting half undressed, he would read history or poetry until the candle was burnt up. The followers of Pythagoras used, before they slept, to compose their minds with some harmonious music. Now our friend finds his reading no less soothing than was the sound of music to them ; but it is more useful. They fall into a profound sleep in which the mind is motionless ; but he, even when asleep, has noble and life-giving thoughts revolving in his mind ; and often things of great worth become clear to him, which when awake, he had sought with unavailing effort."²

In the midst of his studies a series of disasters occurred. In 1421 his father died, and his rela-

² From *De Iciarchia*, Bk. II (op. volg. III, 90-91). *De Iciarchia* is Alberti's last work in which he recalls his own practice as an example to the young.

tions, no doubt taking advantage of his illegitimate birth, refused to support him unless he went into the family business. As so often with Alberti, it is difficult to remember that his account of the matter was written in what we would call the late Middle Ages and not in the nineteenth century. "By my love of letters," he writes, "I was forced to endure opposition, poverty, great and serious wrongs. I would have been certain to make money had I turned from literature to commerce. I lived subordinate to others, when, with my talents, I could have had important transactions under my control. I was forced to solicit favours, when I could myself have been dispensing them. But (he adds in a passage of less Victorian flavour) I have always preferred to wealth and comfort the understanding of things, good discipline and the mysteries of art."³

Cut off from the family funds he was forced to support himself, and went to Bologna to study canon law. But overwork brought on a severe breakdown. Letters, the cause of so much joy to him, which had once seemed like vigorous and most sweet-smelling buds, now swarmed beneath his eyes like scorpions.⁴ He therefore sought relief in music, mathematics and physical exercise.

Alberti's physical prowess has already been alluded to in Burckhardt's quotation from the autobiography. It is an essential part of his personality, not only because it was a triumph of the will. "By nature", he tells us, "his head was so delicate that he could not suffer heat nor cold; but he gradually learned to bear them, first of all going without a hat in summer, then in misty weather, and finally riding bareheaded in the wind. By some flaw in his constitution he loathed garlic and honey, so that the sight of them turned his stomach; but by looking at them and tasting them they gradually became less offensive to him, and so he found from experience that a man can do anything with himself, if he will"—*posse homines de se omnia, ut velint*.⁵ But this strength of will and body was only

³ *De commodis litterarum atque incommodis* (a letter to his brother Carlo).

⁴ *Anon. Biog. in op. volg. I, xc.*

⁵ *Anon. Biog. in op. volg. I, xc.* The same facts are given by Alberti himself in *Della Tranquilita*, *op. volg. I, 50.*

tolerable if it was the expression of a harmonious balance of faculties. "The important thing in all exercises", he writes, "is to control gesture and expression and every movement so that nothing appears to have been done with art or forethought, but rather to have been achieved by some inborn grace. It is most disagreeable to see a civilized man in a hurry."⁶

Something of the same inborn grace seems to have characterized his skill as a musician, for we are told that he learnt music without a master yet his compositions were approved by learned judges. Many passages in his writings describe the power of music on his spirits,⁷ and his biography describes how when he was wounded in the foot he called for musicians and after two hours he had subdued the pain.

As for mathematics, Landino praised his skill in the highest terms, and he was certainly an intimate friend of the greatest mathematician of his age, Paolo Toscanelli, to whom he dedicated his *Intercoenales*. He also wrote several works on the subject, one of which, the *Ludi Mathematici*, survives. But we must remember that in the early Renaissance mathematics was a means to an end. Pure mathematics hardly existed, and had it done so, would have seemed to Alberti a pointless and wasteful form of activity. He tells us that mathematics were to him the most potent of all the means of tranquillizing the mind and purging it of sadness, but only "when he could study to make them of some practical use in life",⁸ and his *Ludi Mathematici* are not games at all but a useful textbook of applied geometry and dynamics.

The period in Bologna also saw the first fruits of his humanist studies. He wrote a Latin comedy, *Philodoxus*, which, published as the work of an antique author, *Lepidus Comicus*, deceived scholars for over a century; and he began the composition of three dialogues in the style of Lucian which he later put together as *Intercoenales*. The comedy is dull and commonplace, but the dialogues are interesting on account of their extreme cynicism.

This may be due in part to the shock of

⁶ *Iciarchia II in op. volg. III, p. 73.* A similar description of good deportment is to be found in Castiglione's *Cortegiano* (Everyman edn. p. 46) and in the *Analects of Confucius passim.*

⁷ e.g. *Della Tranquilita, op. volg. I, 89 and 121.*

⁸ *ibid 127, cf. also Iciarchia in op. volg. iii, 92.*



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MEDAL OF ALBERTI BY MATTEO DE' PASTI

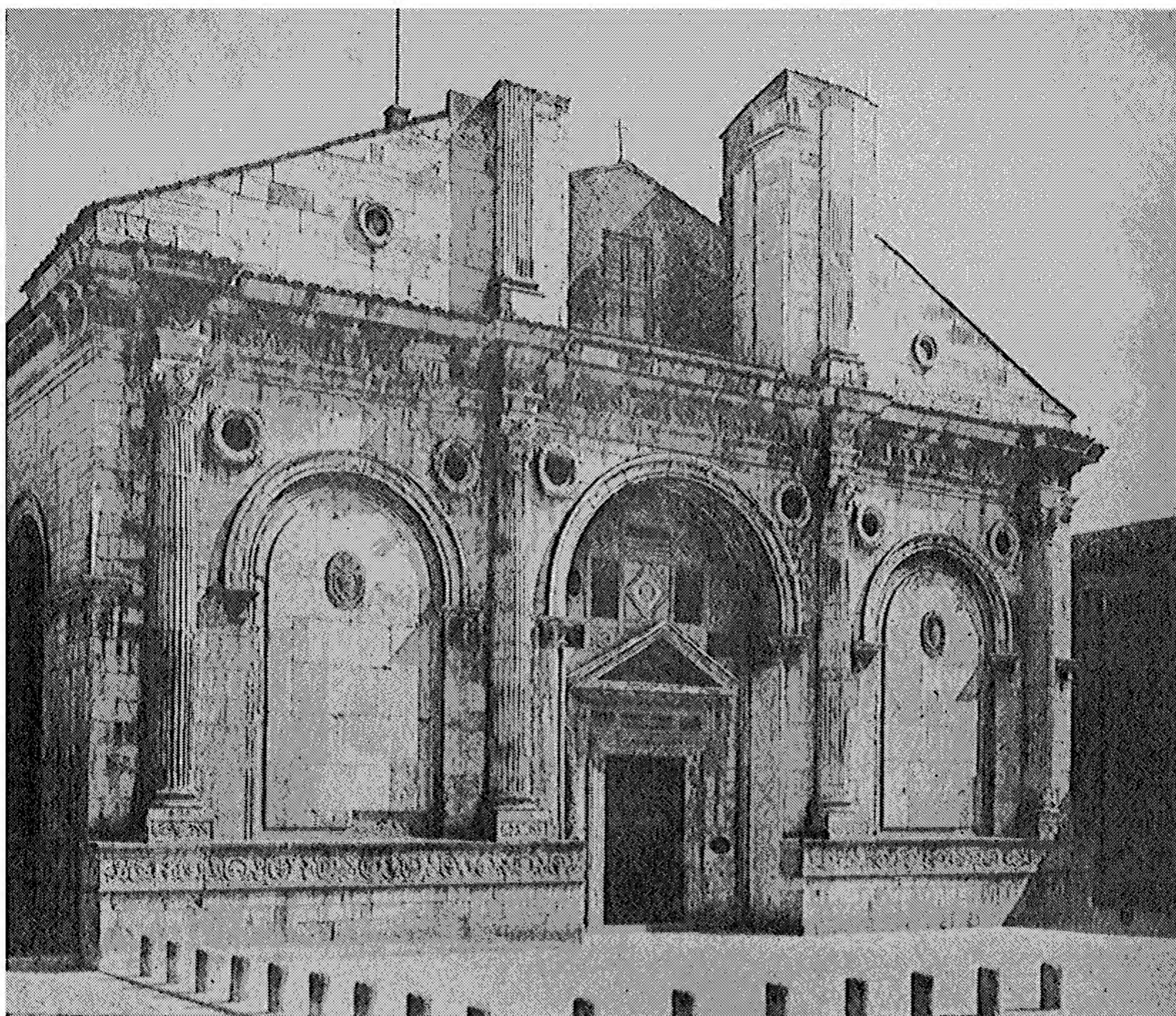
from a Corpus of Italian Medals of the Renaissance before Cellini by G. F. Hill

disillusion which accompanies the development of any sensitive mind, and we have evidence in letters of an unhappy love affair. But Alberti's pessimism outlasted his youth, and his dislike of women was an essential part of his character. He wrote a number of little books, libels properly so called, on love and marriage, in which through the conventional literary form is apparent a genuine distrust of the opposite sex; and the same feeling is given more forthright expression in his dialogues on the family. Women were obstacles in the path of study. His logical mind was shocked by their inconsequence, his detachment by their emotional prejudices, his Roman *gravitas* by their frivolity. No doubt a certain lack of tenderness and imagination was the inevitable complement of his endowments; and we may surmise that his emotional life was to some extent arrested by his fanatical industry and relentless exercise of the will. Often in reading his works we are tempted to echo Blake's "damn braces, bless relaxes". But we must remember that his cynicism extended to mankind in general, and sprang from disappointment that the godlike faculty of reason which, as a humanist, he never ceased to praise, played so little part in the conduct of human society.

Conditions in Bologna in the early fifteenth century were not such as to encourage a favourable view of man as a political animal, and by 1429 tumults between the rival factions had become so unrelentingly violent that Alberti decided to leave. In the previous year the ban of exile against his family had been lifted, and he was free to visit Florence.

He found himself in a centre of creative activity such as the world had not seen since Periclean Athens. Nothing explains this glorious outburst, neither social nor economic history, nor the history of art. As Tintoretto said when asked to explain a shadow on one of his figures, "a cloud passed", and from its rain sprang up a race of giants.

We must suppose that Alberti was introduced immediately into the circle of the Florentine humanists, and by them to the artists who were interpreting their ideals, for although he was forced to leave Florence almost immediately and spend the next six years in France, he could, on his return, refer to the leading artists of the time as old friends. This short visit was of importance, therefore, because it revealed to him the means through which his sense of order might be satisfied. It opened his eyes. Before that date the winged eye had been quick



The Tempio Malatestiano at Rimini, designed by Alberti

to read the classics, to follow the point of a rapier or to detect human weakness ; but does not seem to have concerned itself with shapes and textures, outlines and proportions. With this new vision he visited France and Germany, in the train of his patron, Cardinal Albergati ; and in 1431 he arrived in Rome.

Rome in the early fifteenth century presented to the eye a picture more strange and more evocative than at any time in her long history. She was, Vespasiano di Bisticci tells us, "a city of cowherds". Cattle pastured in the streets, while their half-starved guardians slept or quarrelled in the huts clustered round the bases of the antique basilicas. A few, more energetic, tore the marble *revetements*

from the ancient baths and temples in order to grind them into cement ; but their only constructive activity was the building of watch towers from which rival families could conduct their pointless and interminable feuds. Never can the contact between antique grandeur and modern barbarism have been more impressive ; and never, we may guess, can the buildings of classical Rome have looked more beautiful, their vulgarity subdued by a thousand years of exposure but not yet reduced to mere masonry by systematic pillage and excavation. All this must be remembered when we come to examine Alberti's architectural theory and practice, and find the extent to which the example of ancient Rome dominates his mind.

Unlike Brunellesco, who had been brought up in a great architectural tradition, Alberti had lived surrounded by the nondescript gothicism of Padua and Bologna, so that while Brunellesco found in Rome secrets of construction and style which could be applied to his native Tuscany, Alberti discovered there the whole basis of his art. It was in these Roman years, from 1431 to 1434, that Alberti began diligently to investigate all things relating to the arts of building—to ease his mind, he tells us, though what was weighing on it we do not know, for he had become a member of the Papal civil service, and so was secure from want. In the course of his investigations he wrote a description of Rome, but characteristically enough this consists entirely of measurements and is no more than a geodetic exercise. In the same year he constructed, perhaps we may say invented, a *camera obscura*, an achievement which profoundly impressed his contemporaries, even Vasari, who was hostile to him, comparing it to the invention of printing. Alberti himself, who hardly mentions his own architecture, refers with pride to this invention in his writings, calling its images *miracoli della pittura*—a fact which throws much light on the Renaissance view of painting.

To these years also belongs what a later generation considered his chief claim to immortality, his Treatise on the Family; and since the *della Famiglia* is generally, I think mistakenly, considered the most important of his moral writings, this may be a convenient place to say something about his position as a moralist.

No form of writing offers more immediate opportunities of fame than that which recommends to the world some good way of life, and none has a poorer chance of interesting posterity. Sermons were more popular than novels in the last century, books on social reconstruction in this. The moralist pays in posthumous neglect for the luxury of giving good advice. Nevertheless, a lack of interest in the great moralists of the past is peculiar to this century. Cicero and Seneca found enthusiastic readers for close on two thousand years, but I doubt if they are read for pleasure to-day; and if we do not turn with enthusiasm to *De Officiis*, we shall certainly derive little satis-

faction from *della Famiglia*. One reason is that (however little we may seem to profit by the knowledge) we do know rather more about the action of the human mind—its needs, its impulses, its secret fears—than was known in classical times. True, we may find such knowledge implicit in the words of poets and saints; but it was not formulated or supported by evidence, and so never found its way into the pages of moralists. Cicero and Alberti inviting us to conduct our lives according to reason are like doctors advising us never to be ill.

The classical moralists have an even more radical defect. They feel bound to recommend us to practice virtue, but they cannot think of any valid reason why. In default of divine sanctions they are forced into the position of saying that it pays to be good, a statement so much at variance with experience that the words die on their lips, and they attempt to disguise their conclusion in fable, metaphor and other devices of rhetoric.

Nowhere is this difficulty more acute than in the moral writings of Alberti, because few moralists have so completely dispensed with all religious sanctions, without having some other system of belief to take their place. He never hints at a future life; he writes indifferently of God and the gods but in such a strain as to leave considerable doubt of his belief in either, and in his dialogue on religion one of the speakers says, without contradiction, that the gods take no care of men, who are themselves responsible for all the good and evil in their lives. It is true that in the eighteenth century many writers were able to maintain with consistency this humanist basis of mortality. But by that time a new order of the universe had been established as a background to scepticism. Science and mathematics, Bacon, Descartes and Newton had intervened. In the early fifteenth century to dispense with every criterion but man was a much more difficult undertaking.

Yet it is, of course, this belief in man which takes the chill off Alberti's moral writings and gives them some coherency. Again and again we come upon the dictum of Protagoras that man is the mode and measure of all things; other classical quotations in the same sense

abound,⁹ and Alberti's own writing takes on a warmer eloquence when he describes the gifts which have been conferred on the human race: "to you", he says, in a passage which I will translate literally, "to you is given a body more graceful than that of the other animals, to you the power of apt and various movements, to you most sharp and delicate senses; to you wit, reason, memory like an immortal god". In other words, "What a piece of work is man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! In form and moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals!"¹⁰ And yet, how infinitely far is Alberti from Hamlet's melancholy conclusion. We can understand why the Italian scholar Tofanin put a figure of Hamlet on the cover of his book *The End of Humanism*.

For Alberti's humanism was always an incentive to action. "Man is born", he says, "to be of use to man. And what is the point of all human arts? Simply to benefit humanity." This strictly practical humanism, combined with the commercial traditions of his family gives to the *Della Famiglia* a curiously nineteenth-century flavour. Much of it might have been written by an enlightened Manchester cotton spinner of the mid-Victorian era, a disciple of John Bright and Samuel Smiles. In particular the character of Gianozzo is almost a caricature of a familiar type. "A man cannot set his mind to greater or more liberal work", says this plain but honest man, "than the use of money. Business consists of buying and selling, and no one of any sense can consider this a base occupation, because when you sell it is not only a mercenary affair; you have been of use to the buyer, and what he pays you for is your labour." No wonder Stombart in his history of the bourgeois considers that Alberti initiates the first epoch of modern capitalism

⁹ cf. for example *della Famiglia*, bk. II, in *op. volg.* I, 189.

¹⁰ Alberti's speech is from *Della Tranquilita dell' Animo*, Bk. II, *op. volg.* I, 70. Its likeness to Hamlet's famous soliloquy is presumably accidental, as the *Della Tranquilita* was not printed till 1843, and no MS is recorded in England. Nevertheless, the sequence of images is suggestive, and both may have had a common source. It is, of course, a characteristic piece of humanist rhetoric, cf. Pico della Mirandola's *De Hominis Dignitate*.

and compares him with Benjamin Franklin. Yet we have only to picture in our minds the faces of Alberti and Franklin to realize how misleading that kind of historical generalization can be. The proud, taut Florentine profile certainly implies a view of life very different from that of the bland, pious, lachrymose old quaker. Alberti's renunciation of religion, with all the comforts and compromises which it offered to the eighteenth century, gives his doctrines a tension and toughness, and often provides a fragment of grit in a soft mouthful of platitudes.

Alberti's moral writings are as much a revival of the antique as his architecture, but they have an equal claim to be considered original, for in both cases the original models needed considerable adaptation. The economic doctrines of Gianozzo, for example, though full of antique counsels of moderation and social duty, are really based on the traditions of Alberti's own family and bear the same relations to the commercial philosophy of fourteenth-century Florence as his Palazzo Rucellai does to the Florentine palaces of the same period. In two respects, moreover, his teachings do seem to contribute something to the future which is not to be found in quite the same degree in the antique moralists.

The first of these I have already alluded to: his belief in the moral value of industry. It has often been pointed out that hard work for its own sake forms no part of Christian teaching, and was never recommended by the Catholic Church; it was, in fact, the gospel of protestantism, and finds its most violent expression in the writings of such fanatical protestants as Thomas Carlyle. Alberti's support of this unpleasant doctrine shows how closely entwined are the roots of protestantism and capitalist economy, the very word industry, by its double meaning, sealing the connexion. But we must grant that Alberti's passion for work had other, more sympathetic origins. It was, to some extent, due to his feeling of man as part of nature, and thus involved in a continual process of creation. As quoted by Burckhardt, the passage on his love of nature has a post-Wordsworthian character, which the original text will not sustain. It is worth re-translating, as it not only expresses Alberti's attitude to

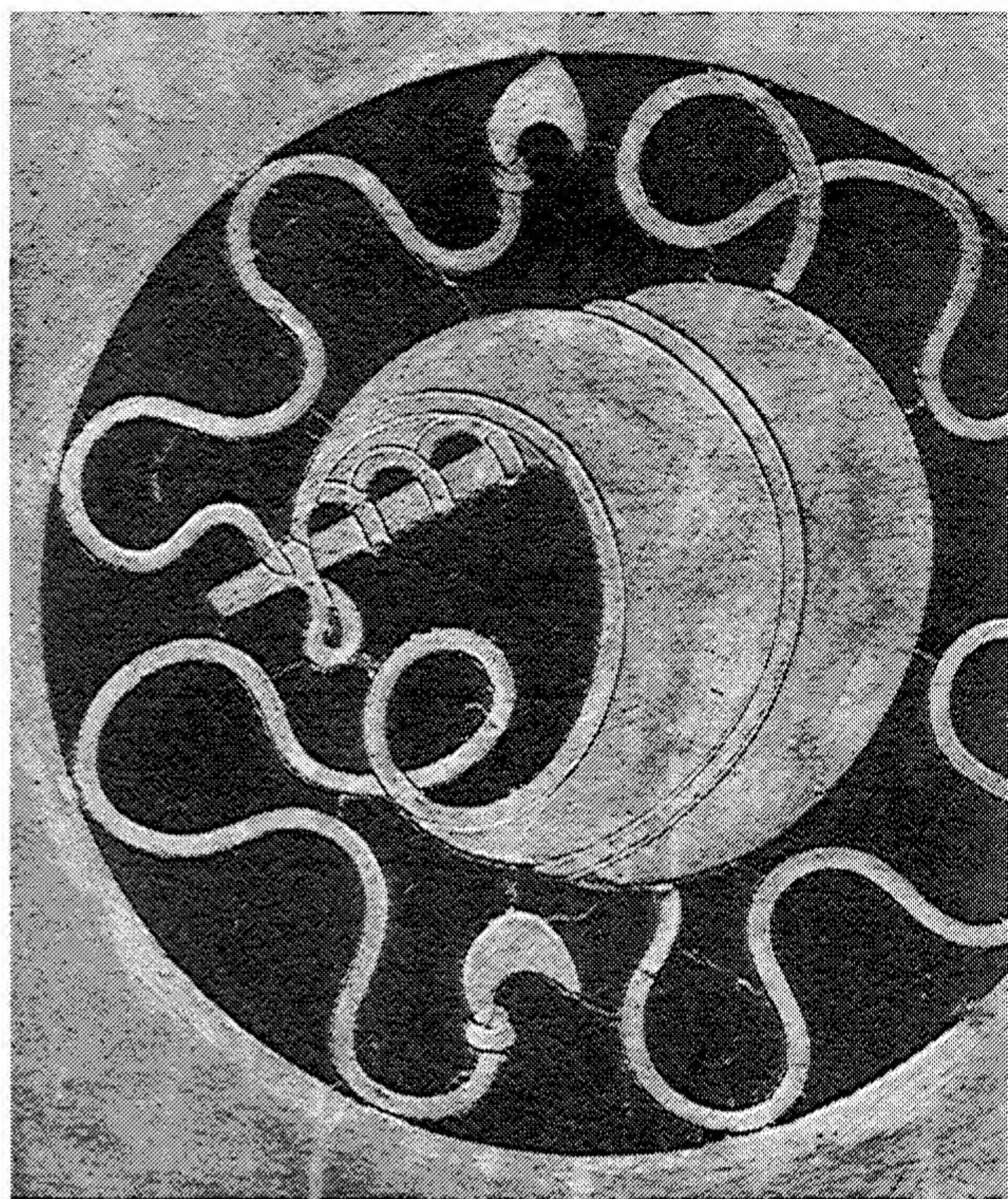
work, but contains the essence of his whole philosophy.

“Often in spring, when the woods and fields gave promise of harvest, he would suddenly grow sad, and say to himself *Anche tu devi promettere qualche frutto di tuoi studi* (Thou also must bring forth some fruits of thy studies). And in summer the yellowing cornfields and fruit laden trees brought tears to his eyes. ‘Look’, he would exclaim, ‘how we are surrounded by witnesses accusing us of idleness. There is nothing in nature but produces, in the course of a year, some great benefit to mankind. And what can I show—well made according to the strength that is in me?’”¹¹

So man must work in order to be in harmony with the forces of nature. And with the introduction of the word “harmony” a new aspect of Alberti’s thought demands our consideration: his Platonism. With his hard, practical sense Alberti was far from respectful towards philosophers. The schoolmen, of course, meant nothing to him, and we may agree that most of the characters in Diogenes Laertius are slightly ridiculous. But he always speaks of Plato with profound admiration and pays him the sincerest compliment of borrowing from the *Timaeus* a whole section of his *Della Architettura*. The idea of a harmony uniting parts with whole and man with nature was the one great principle underlying all his speculations, and from Plato, too, came his belief that this harmony could be expressed in number. But in many ways he was the reverse of platonic. His mind was too concrete to follow the subtleties of Plato’s arguments, and too realistic to apply Plato’s conclusions to life or society. “The wise”, he says, “will blame those who studiously devote themselves to complicated and unimportant subjects; as those, who, with prolonged vigils, obstinately concentrate on some minute motions of the stars, or try to work out the squaring of the circle.”¹² So what can the platonist do, whose desire for order is

¹¹ *Anon. Biog., op. volg.* I, c. xiv.

¹² *Iciarchia Bm. II op. volg.* III, 92. It is interesting to note that this passage is from his last work, written after he had sat under Marsilio Ficino. For a similar passage on mathematics, see *Della Tranq. dell’ Animo, op. volg.* I, 128.



A MARBLE INLAY, DESIGNED BY ALBERTI
from the *Santo Sepolcro Rucellai*, Florence

so great that he cannot tolerate the imperfections of society, but whose interest in action and technicalities is such that he can find no satisfaction in science and pure mathematics? There is really only one answer: become an architect. And in fact, Alberti became one of the greatest architects of the fifteenth century and the author of the first treatise on architecture since antiquity. But these activities would be the subject of a separate and more extended study.¹³

¹³ The foregoing was written as an introduction to a longer study of Alberti, dealing with his work as architect, his treatise on architecture, his theory of painting, and several of his other multifarious interests. Of this study one part has already been published—*Leon Battista Alberti on Painting* in *Proceedings of the British Academy*, xxx.